Aurelianus Ambrosius

(Early 5th Century – Late 5th Century)

LEGEND

Ambrosius Aurelianus (Welsh: *Emrys Wledig*; Anglicised as Ambrose Aurelian and called Aurelius Ambrosius in the *Historia Regum Britanniae* and elsewhere) was a war leader of the Romano-British who won an important battle against the Anglo-Saxons in the 5th century, according to Gildas. He also appeared independently in the legends of the Britons, beginning with the 9th-century *Historia Brittonum*. Eventually, he was transformed by Geoffrey of Monmouth into the uncle of King Arthur, the brother of Arthur's father Uther Pendragon, as a ruler who precedes and predeceases them both. He also appears as a young prophet who meets the tyrant Vortigern; in this guise, he was later transformed into the wizard Merlin.

ACCORDING TO GILDAS

Ambrosius Aurelianus is one of the few people whom Gildas identifies by name in his sermon *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, and the only one named from the 5th century. *De Excidio* is considered the oldest extant British document about the so-called Arthurian period of Sub-Roman Britain. Following the destructive assault of the Saxons, the survivors gather together under the leadership of Ambrosius, who is described as:

> *"... a gentleman who, perhaps alone of the Romans, had survived the shock of this notable storm. Certainly his parents, who had worn the purple, were slain in it. His descendants in our day have become greatly inferior to their grandfather's [avita] excellence. Under him our people regained their strength, and challenged the victors to battle. The Lord assented, and the battle went their way."*

Ambrosius was possibly of high birth and very likely a Christian: Gildas says that he won his battles "with God's help". Ambrosius's parents were slain by the Saxons and he was amongst the few survivors of their initial invasion.

According to Gildas, Ambrosius organised the survivors into an armed force and achieved the first military victory over the Saxon invaders. However, this victory was not decisive: "Sometimes the Saxons and sometimes the citizens [meaning the Romano-British inhabitants] were victorious." Due to Gildas's description of him, Ambrosius is one of the figures called the Last of the Romans.

Scholarship questions

Two points in Gildas's description have attracted much scholarly commentary. The first is what Gildas meant by saying Ambrosius' family "had worn the purple". Roman emperors and male Patricians wore clothes with a purple band to denote their class so the reference to purple may be to an aristocratic heritage. Roman military tribunes (*tribuni militum*), senior officers in Roman legions, wore a similar purple band so the reference may be to a family background of military leadership. The tradition was old, as the togas and pallia of already ancient senators and tribunes were trimmed with the purple band. In the church, "the purple" is a euphemism for blood and therefore "wearing the purple" may be a reference to martyrdom or a bishop's robe. In addition, in the later Roman Empire both Roman consuls and governors of consular rank also wore clothes with a purple fringe. The *Notitia Dignitatum*, a Roman catalogue of official posts, lists four or five provincial governors in Roman Britain and two of them were of consular rank. One was the governor of Maxima Caesariensis and the other that of Valentia. The parent who wore the purple may well have been one of these governors, whose names were not recorded.

It has been suggested by historian Alex Woolf that Ambrosius may have been related to the 5th-century Romano-British usurpers Marcus or Gratian – Woolf expresses a preference based on nomenclature for Marcus. Frank D. Reno, an Arthurian scholar, has instead argued that the name "Aurelianus" indicates the descent of Ambrosius from the Illyrian Roman emperor Aurelian (reigned 270–275). Aurelian's military campaigns included the conquest of the Gallic Empire. N. J. Higham suggests that Ambrosius may have been distantly related to imperial families of the late Roman Empire, such as the Theodosian dynasty. Branches of this particular dynasty were known to be active in western Roman provinces like Hispania.

Mike Ashley instead focuses on the name "Ambrosius" and its possible connection to Saint Ambrosius, a fourth-century Bishop of Milan, who also served as consular governor in areas of Roman Italy. The father of the Bishop is sometimes claimed to be a fourth century Praetorian prefect of Gaul named Aurelius Ambrosius, whose areas included Britain, though some modern scholars doubt that Saint Ambrosius was related to this man (instead identifying his father with an official named Uranius mentioned in an extract from the Theodosian Code). Ashley suggests that Ambrosius Aurelianus was related to the two Aurelii Ambrosii. Tim Venning points out that the name "Aurelianus" could be the result of a Roman adoption. When a boy was adopted into a new gens (clan), he received the family names of his new family but was often additionally called by a cognomen indicating his descent from his original family. The additional cognomen often had the form "-anus". When Gaius Octavius from gens Octavia was adopted by his uncle Gaius Julius Caesar, he was often distinguished from his adoptive father by the addition "Octavianus". In this case, Ambrosius may have been a member of gens Aurelia who was adopted by another gens/family.

The second question is the meaning of the word *avita*: Gildas could have meant "ancestors", or intended it to mean more specifically "grandfather" – thus indicating Ambrosius lived about a generation before the Battle of Badon. Lack of information prevents sure answers to these questions.

Gildas's motives

N. J. Higham, author of a book on Gildas and the literary tropes that he used, has suggested that Gildas may have had considerable motive for drawing attention to Ambrosius. He was not attempting to write a historical biography of the man, according to Higham, but setting him as an example to his contemporaries. It was essential to the philosophy of Gildas that Briton leaders who achieved victory over the barbarians were only able to do so because of divine aid. And only those who had superior Christian virtues were deserving of this aid. Ambrosius Aurelianus was apparently known for at least one such victory over the barbarians. To fit him into his worldview, Gildas was almost required to feature the former warrior as a man of exceptional virtues and obedience to God. He was made to fit Gildas's version of a model leader.

Higham also suggests that the Roman lineage of Ambrosius was highlighted for a reason. Gildas was apparently intentionally connecting him with the legitimate authority and military virtues of the Romans. He was also contrasting him with the subsequent Briton rulers whose reigns lacked in such legitimacy.

Identifying historical figures

Gildas is a primary source for the Battle of Badon, yet he never mentions the names of the combatants. It is not known if Ambrosius Aurelianus or his successors took part in the battle. The names of the Saxon leaders in the battle are not recorded.

The identities of Ambrosius's descendants are unknown, since Gildas never identifies them by name. It is assumed that they were Gildas's contemporaries and known to the author. Higham suggests that they were prominent figures of the time. Their lineage and identities were probably sufficiently familiar to his intended audience that they did not have to be named. The work portrays Ambrosius's descendants as inferior to their ancestor as part of his criticism on rulers of his time, according to Higham. Those criticised were likely aware that the vitriol was intended for them, but probably would not challenge a work offering such a glowing report of their illustrious ancestor.

Mike Ashley suggests that the descendants of Ambrosius could include other people named by Gildas. He favours the inclusion in this category of one Aurelius Caninus ("Aurelius the dog-like"), whom Gildas accuses of parricide, fornication, adultery, and warmongering. His name "Aurelius" suggests Romano-British descent. The insulting nickname "Caninus" was probably invented by Gildas himself, who similarly insults other contemporary rulers. Due to the name used by Gildas, there are theories that this ruler was actually named Conan/Cynan/Kenan. Some identify him with Cynan Garwyn, a 6th-century King of Powys, though it is uncertain if he was a contemporary of Gildas or lived one or two generations following him. Another theory is that this ruler did not reign in Britain but in Brittany. Caninus, in this view, might be Conomor ("Great Dog"). Conomor is considered a likelier contemporary of Gildas. Conomor was likely from Domnonée, an area of Brittany controlled by British immigrants from Dumnonia. He might be remembered in British legend as Mark of Cornwall.

Gildas primarily describes the Saxons as barbarian raiders; their invasions involved a slow and difficult process of military conquest. By AD 500, possibly the time described by Gildas, Anglo-Saxons controlled the Isle of Wight, Kent, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, and coastal areas of Northumberland and Yorkshire. The rest of the former Roman Britain was still under the control of the local Britons or remnants of the Roman provincial administration. Gildas also mentions depopulation of cities and this probably reflects historical facts. Londinium, once a major city, was completely abandoned during the 5th century.

ACCORDING TO BEDE

Bede follows Gildas's account of Ambrosius in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, but in his *Chronica Majora* he dates Ambrosius's victory to the reign of the Emperor Zeno (474–491).

Bede's treatment of the 5th century history of Great Britain is not particularly valuable as a source. Until about the year 418, Bede could choose between several historical sources and often followed the writings of Orosius. Following the end of Orosius's history, Bede apparently lacked other available sources and relied extensively on Gildas. Entries from this period tend to be close paraphrases of Gildas's account with mostly stylistic changes. Bede's account of Ambrosius Aurelianus has been translated as following:

> *When the army of the enemy had exterminated or scattered the native peoples, they returned home and the Britons slowly began to recover strength and courage. They emerged from their hiding-places and with one accord they prayed for the help of God that they might not be completely annihilated. Their leader at that time was a certain Ambrosius Aurelianus, a discreet man, who was, as it happened, the sole member of the Roman race who had survived this storm in which his parents, who bore a royal and famous name, had perished. Under his leadership the Britons regained their strength, challenged their victors to battle, and, with God's help, won the day.*

Bede does not mention the descendants of Ambrosius Aurelianus, nor their supposed degeneracy.

ACCORDING TO NENNIUS

The *Historia Brittonum*, attributed to Nennius, preserves several snippets of lore about Ambrosius. Despite the traditional attribution, the authorship of the work and the period of its writing are open questions for modern historians. There are several extant manuscript versions of the work, varying in details. The most important ones have been dated to between the 9th and the 11th century. Some modern scholars think it unlikely that the work was composed by a single writer or compiler, suggesting that it may have taken centuries to reach its final form, though this theory is not conclusive.

In Chapter 31, we are told that Vortigern ruled in fear of Ambrosius. This is the first mention of Ambrosius in the work. According to Frank D. Reno, this would indicate that Ambrosius's influence was formidable, since Vortigern considered him more of a threat than northern invaders and attempts to restore Roman rule in Britain. The chapter relates events following the end of Roman rule in Britain and preceding Vortigern's alliance with the Saxons.

The most significant appearance of Ambrosius is the story about Ambrosius, Vortigern, and the two dragons beneath Dinas Emrys, "Fortress of Ambrosius" in Chapters 40–42. In this account, Ambrosius is still an adolescent but has supernatural powers. He intimidates Vortigern and the royal magicians. When it is revealed that Ambrosius is the son of a Roman consul, Vortigern is convinced to cede to the younger man the castle of Dinas Emrys and all the kingdoms in the western part of Britain. Vortigern then retreats to the north, in an area called Gwynessi. This story was later retold with more detail by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his fictionalised *Historia Regum Britanniae*, conflating the personage of Ambrosius with the Welsh tradition of Myrddin the visionary, known for oracular utterances that foretold the coming victories of the native Celtic inhabitants of Britain over the Saxons and the Normans. Geoffrey also introduces him into the *Historia* under the name Aurelius Ambrosius as one of three sons of Constantine III, along with Constans and Uther Pendragon.

In Chapter 48, Ambrosius Aurelianus is described as "king among all the kings of the British nation". The chapter records that Pascent, the son of Vortigern, was granted rule over the regions of Buellt and Gwrtheyrnion by Ambrosius. Finally, in Chapter 66, various events are dated from a Battle of Guoloph (often identified with Wallop, 15 km (9.3 mi) ESE of Amesbury near Salisbury), which is said to have been between Ambrosius and Vitolinus. The author dates this battle as taking place 12 years from the reign of Vortigern.

It is not clear how these various traditions about Ambrosius relate to each other, or whether they come from the same tradition; it is very possible that these references are to different men with the same name. Frank D. Reno points out that the works call all these men "Ambrosius"/"Emrys". The cognomen "Aurelianus" is never used. The *Historia Brittonum* dates the battle of Guoloph to "the twelfth year of Vortigern", by which the year 437 seems to be meant. This is perhaps a generation before the battle that Gildas may imply was commanded by Ambrosius Aurelianus.

The text never identifies who Ambrosius's father is, just gives his title as a Roman consul. When an adolescent Ambrosius speaks of his father, there is no suggestion that this father is deceased. The boy is not identified as an orphan. The exact age of Ambrosius is not given in his one encounter with Vortigern. Frank D. Reno suggests that he might be as young as 13 years old, barely a teenager.

It is impossible to know to what degree Ambrosius actually wielded political power, and over what area. Ambrosius and Vortigern are shown as being in conflict in the *Historia Brittonum*, and some historians have suspected that this preserves a historical core of the existence of two parties in opposition to one another, one headed by Ambrosius and the other by Vortigern. J. N. L. Myres built upon this suspicion and speculated that belief in Pelagianism reflected an actively provincial outlook in Britain and that Vortigern represented the Pelagian party, while Ambrosius led the Catholic one. Subsequent historians accepted Myres's speculation as fact, creating a narrative of events in 5th century Britain with various degrees of elaborate detail. Yet a simpler alternative interpretation of the conflict between these two figures is that the *Historia Brittonum* is preserving traditions hostile to the purported descendants of Vortigern, who at this time were a ruling house in Powys. This interpretation is supported by the negative character of all of the stories retold about Vortigern in the *Historia Brittonum*, which include his alleged practice of incest.

The identity of Ambrosius's last mentioned enemy, Vitalinus, is somewhat obscure. Various manuscripts of the *Historia* and translations also render his name as "Guitolin", "Guitolini", and "Guitholini". He is mentioned in chapter 49 as one of four sons of Gloiu and co-founder of the city of Gloucester. No other background information is given. There are theories that Gloiu is also the father of Vortigern, but the genealogy is obscure and no supporting primary text can be found. There have been further attempts to identify Vitalinus with a pro-Vortigern or anti-Roman faction in Britain, opposed to the rise of the Romano-British Ambrosius. However, this is rendered problematic since Vitalinus seems to also have a Romano-British name. The traditional view of pro-Roman and pro-Briton factions active in this period might oversimplify a more complex situation.

ACCORDING TO WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY

Ambrosius appears briefly in the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* ("Deeds of the Kings of the English") by William of Malmesbury. Despite its name, the work attempted to reconstruct British history in general by drawing together the varying accounts of Gildas, Bede, Nennius, and various chroniclers. The work features Ambrosius as the apparent employer of Arthur. The relevant passage has been translated as follows:

> *On the death of Vortimer, the strength of the Britons grew faint, their diminished hopes went backwards; and straight-way they would have come to ruin, had not Ambrosius, the sole survivor of the Romans, who was monarch of the realm after Vortigern, repressed the overweening barbarians through the distinguished achievements of the warlike Arthur.*

William swiftly shifts attention from Ambrosius to Arthur, and proceeds to narrate Arthur's supposed victory in the Battle of Badon. The narrative is probably the first to connect Ambrosius and Arthur. William had to reconcile the accounts of Gildas and Bede who implied that Ambrosius was connected to the battle, and that of Nennius which clearly stated that it was Arthur who was connected to the battle. He solved the apparent discrepancy by connecting both of them to it. Ambrosius as the king of the Britons and Arthur as his most prominent general and true victor of the battle.

ACCORDING TO GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH

Ambrosius Aurelianus appears in later pseudo-chronicle tradition beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* with the slightly garbled name *Aurelius Ambrosius*, now presented as son of a King Constantine. King Constantine's eldest son Constans is murdered at Vortigern's instigation, and the two remaining sons (Ambrosius and Uther, still very young) are quickly hustled into exile in Brittany. (This does not fit with Gildas' account, in which Ambrosius' family perished in the turmoil of the Saxon uprisings.) Later, the two brothers return from exile with a large army when Vortigern's power has faded. They destroy Vortigern and become friends with Merlin. They go on to defeat the Saxon leader Hengist in two battles at Maisbeli (probably Ballifield, near Sheffield) and Cunengeburg. Hengist is executed and Ambrosius becomes king of Britain. However, he is poisoned by his enemies, and Uther succeeds him. The text identifies the poisoner as Eopa.

Judgements vary wildly of the value of Geoffrey as both a historian and a literary storyteller. He has been praised for giving us detailed information about an otherwise obscure period and possibly preserving information from lost sources, and condemned for an excessive use of artistic licence and possibly inventing stories wholecloth. According to Frank D. Reno, whenever Geoffrey uses extant sources, the details in the text tend to be accurate. Assuming that he was also using sources lost to us, it may be difficult to decide which details are truthful. Reno suggests that "individual judgements" have to be made about various elements of his narrative.

Geoffrey changed the word "Aurelianus" to "Aurelius", which is the name of a Roman gens. Geoffrey retains the story of Emrys and the dragons from Nennius, but identifies the figure with Merlin. Merlin is Geoffrey's version of a historical figure known as Myrddin Wyllt. Myrddin is only mentioned once in the *Annales Cambriae*, at an entry dated to 573. The name of Merlin is given in Latin as Ambrosius Merlinus. "Merlinus" may have been intended as the agnomen of a Roman or Romano-British individual like Ambrosius.

Elements of Ambrosius Aurelianus, the traditional warrior king, are used by Geoffrey for other characters. Ambrosius' supposed supernatural powers are passed to Merlin. Geoffrey's Aurelius Ambrosius rises to the throne but dies early, passing the throne to a previously unknown brother called Uther Pendragon. The role of warrior king is shared by Uther and his son Arthur.

Geoffrey also uses the character Gloiu, father of Vitalinus/Vitolinus, derived from Nennius. He names this character as a son of Claudius and appointed by his father as Duke of the Welsh. His predecessor as Duke is called Arvirargus. Assuming that Claudius and Arvirargus are supposed to be contemporaries, then this Claudius is the Roman emperor Claudius I (reigned 41–54). It seems unlikely that Claudius would have living grandsons in the 5th century, four centuries following his death. Reno suggests that Claudius II (reigned 268–270) would be a more likely "Claudius" to have living descendants in the 5th century.

Geoffrey for the first time gives a genealogy of Ambrosius. He is supposedly a paternal nephew of Aldroenus, King of Brittany, son of Constantine and an unnamed Briton noblewoman, adoptive grandson (on his mother's side) of Guthelinus/Vitalinus, Bishop of London, younger brother of Constans and older brother of Uther Pendragon. Ambrosius and Uther are supposedly raised by their adoptive maternal grandfather Guthelinus/Vitalinus. It is not explicitly covered in Geoffrey's narrative, but this genealogy makes Constantine and his children descendants of Conan Meriadoc, legendary founder of the line of Kings of Brittany. Conan is also featured in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, where he is appointed king by Roman emperor Magnus Maximus (reigned 383–388).

Constantine's reign is placed by Geoffrey as following the Groans of the Britons mentioned by Gildas. Constantine is reported killed by a Pict and his reign is followed by a brief succession crisis. Candidates for the throne included all three sons of Constantine, but there were problems for their eventual rise to the throne. Constans was a monk, and Ambrosius and Uther were underage and still in their cradle. The crisis is resolved when Vortigern places Constans on the throne, and then serves as his chief adviser and power behind the throne. When Constans is killed by the Picts serving as bodyguards of Vortigern, Vortigern feigns anguish and has the killers executed. Ambrosius is still underage and Vortigern rises to the throne.

The chronology offered by Geoffrey for the early life of Ambrosius contradicts Gildas and Nennius, and is also internally inconsistent. The Groans of the Britons involves an appeal by the Britons to Roman consul "Agitius". This person has been identified with Flavius Aetius (d. 454), magister militum ("master of soldiers") of the Western Roman Empire and consul of the year 446. The Groans are generally dated to the 440s and 450s, preceding the death of Aetius. If Geoffrey's Constantine rose to the throne immediately following the Groans, this would place his reign in this period. Geoffrey gives a 10-year reign for Constantine and his marriage lasts just as long. However the eldest son Constans is clearly older than 10 years by the time his father dies.

He is already an adult candidate of the throne and has had time to follow a monastic career. Even assuming there is a time gap between the death of Constantine and the adulthood of Constans, his younger brothers have not aged at all in the narrative. Geoffrey's narrative has an underage Ambrosius, if not a literal infant, in the 460s. Accounts deriving from Gildas and Nennius place Ambrosius in the prime of his life in the same decade. Most telling is that Geoffrey has Vortigern rising to the throne in the 460s. Nennius places the rise of Vortigern in the year 425, and Vortigern is entirely absent in chronologies of the 460s. Suggesting that he was deceased by that time.

Geoffrey's narrative includes as a major character Hengist, as leader of the Saxons. He is featured as the father of Queen Rowena and father-in-law of Vortigern. Other Saxon characters in the narrative tend to receive less attention by the writer, but their names tend to correspond to Anglo-Saxons known from other sources. Henginst's supposed son Octa is apparently Octa of Kent, a 6th-century ruler variously connected to Hengist as a son or descendant. The other son, Ebissa, is more difficult to identify. He might correspond to kinsmen of Hengist variously identified as "Ossa", "Oisc", and "Aesc". A minor Saxon character called "Cherdic" is probably Cerdic of Wessex, though elsewhere Geoffrey calls the same king "Cheldric". He actually may appear under three different names in the narrative, since Geoffrey elsewhere calls the interpreter of Hengist "Ceretic", a variant of the same name.

Geoffrey, in the last chapters featuring Vortigern, has the king served by magicians. This detail derives from Nennius, though Nennius was talking about Vortigern's "wise men". They may not have been magic users but advisers. Vortigern's encounter with Emrys/Merlin takes place in this part of the narrative. Merlin warns Vortigern that Ambrosius and Uther have already sailed for Britain and are soon to arrive, apparently to claim his throne. Ambrosius soon arrives at the head of the army and is crowned king. He besieges Vortigern at the castle of "Genoreu", which is identified with Nennius' *Cair Guorthigirn* ("Fort Vortigern") and the hillfort at Little Doward. Ambrosius burns the castle down and Vortigern dies with it.

Having killed Vortigern, Ambrosius next turns his attention to Hengist. Despite the fact that no earlier military actions of Ambrosius are recorded, the Saxons have already heard of his bravery and battle prowess. They immediately retreat beyond the Humber. Hengist soon amasses a massive army to face Ambrosius. His army counts 200,000 men and Ambrosius' only 10,000 men. He marches south and the first battle between the two armies takes place in Maisbeli, where Ambrosius emerges the victor. It is unclear what location Geoffrey had in mind. Maisbeli translates to "the field of Beli", and could be related to the Beli Mawr of Welsh legend and/or the Celtic god Belenus. Alternatively it could be a field where the Beltane festival was celebrated. Geoffrey could derive the name from a similar-sounding toponym. For example, Meicen of the Hen Ogledd ("Old North"), traditionally identified with Hatfield.

Following his defeat, Hengist retreats towards Cunungeburg. Geoffrey probably had in mind Conisbrough, not far from Hatfield. Ambrosius leads his army against the new position of the Saxons. The second battle is more evenly fought, and Hengist has a chance to achieve victory. However, Ambrosius receives reinforcements from Brittany and the tide of the battle turns in favour of the Britons. Hengist himself is captured by his old enemy Eldol, Consul of Gloucester and decapitated. Soon after the battle, the surviving Saxon leaders Octa and Eosa submit themselves to Ambrosius' rule. He pardons them and grants them an area near Scotland. The area is not named, but Geoffrey could be basing this on Bernicia, a real Anglo-Saxon kingdom covering areas in the modern borders of Scotland and England.

Geoffrey closely connects the deaths of Vortigern and Hengist, which are elsewhere poorly recorded. Vortigern historically died in the 450s, and various dates for the death of Hengist have been proposed, between the 450s and the 480s. Octa of Kent, the supposed son and heir of Hengist, was still alive in the 6th century and seems to belong to a later historical era than his father. The ruling family of the Kingdom of Kent were called the Oiscingas, a term identifying them as descendants of Oisc of Kent, not of Hengist. In effect, none of them was likely a literal son of Hengist and their relation to Hengist may have been a later invention. Geoffrey did not invent the connection, but his sources here were likely legendary in nature.

Following his victories and the end of the wars, Ambrosius organises the burial of killed nobles at Kaercaradduc. Geoffrey identifies this otherwise unknown location with Caer-Caradog (Salisbury). Ambrosius wants a permanent memorial for the slain and assigns the task to Merlin. The result is the so-called Giants' Ring. Its location in the vicinity of Salisbury has led to its identification with Stonehenge, though Geoffrey never uses that term. Stonehenge is closer to Amesbury than Salisbury. The ring formation of the monument could equally apply to Avebury, the largest stone circle in Europe.

IN OTHER TEXTS

In Welsh legend and texts, Ambrosius appears as *Emrys Wledig* (Emperor Ambrose).[4] The term "Wledig" is a title used by notable royal and military commanders. It is mostly used for famous figures such as Cunedda, and the Roman emperor Magnus Maximus ("Macsen Wledig") when he appears in Welsh folklore.

In Robert de Boron's *Merlin*, he is called simply *Pendragon* and his younger brother is named *Uter*, which he changes to *Uterpendragon* after the death of the elder sibling. This is probably a confusion that entered oral tradition from Wace's *Roman de Brut*. Wace usually only refers to *li roi* ("the king") without naming him, and someone has taken an early mention of Uther's epithet *Pendragon* as the name of his brother.

Richard Carew's *Survey of Cornwall* (1602) drew on an earlier French writer, Nicholas Gille, who mentions Moigne, brother of Aurelius and Uther, who was duke of Cornwall, and "gouerner of the Realme" under Emperor Honorius.

POSSIBLE IDENTIFICATION WITH OTHER FIGURES

Riothamus

Léon Fleuriot has suggested Ambrosius is identical to Riothamus, a Brythonic leader who fought a major battle against the Goths in France around the year 470. Fleuriot argues that Ambrosius led the Britons in the battle, in which he was defeated and forced to retreat to Burgundy. Fleuriot proposed that he then returned to Britain to continue the war against the Saxons.

BATTLE OF BADON

The **Battle of Badon**, also known as the **Battle of Mons Badonicus**, was purportedly fought between Britons and Anglo-Saxons in Post-Roman Britain during the late 5th or early 6th century. It was credited as a major victory for the Britons, stopping the westward encroachment of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms for a period.

The earliest known references to the battle, by the British cleric Gildas, date to the 6th century. It is chiefly known today for the supposed involvement of the man who would later be remembered as the legendary King Arthur; although it is not agreed that Arthur was a historical person, his name first appears in the 9th-century *Historia Brittonum*, where he is mentioned as having participated in the battle alongside the Brittonic kings as a war commander, though is not described as a king himself. Because of the limited number of sources, there is no certainty about the date, location, or details of the fighting.

Almost all scholars agree that this battle did take place. Gildas, who wrote within living memory of the battle, does not mention Arthur or the names of other British leaders who took part. He also omits the names of the Saxon leaders. Gildas also does not describe it as an actual open battle, but rather as a siege. It remains unclear whether the Saxons were besieging the Britons or the Britons were besieging the Saxons.

Historical accounts

The earliest mention of the Battle of Badon appears in Gildas' *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* (*On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain*), written in the early to mid-6th century. In it, the Anglo-Saxons are said to have "dipped [their] red and savage tongue in the western ocean" before Ambrosius Aurelianus organized a British resistance with the survivors of the initial Saxon onslaught. Gildas describes the period that followed Ambrosius' initial success:

> *From that time, the citizens were sometimes victorious, sometimes the enemy, in order that the Lord, according to His wont, might try in this nation the Israel of today, whether it loves Him or not. This continued up to the year of the siege of Badon Hill (obsessionis Badonici montis), and of almost the last great slaughter inflicted upon the rascally crew. And this commences, a fact I know, as the forty-fourth year, with one month now elapsed; it is also the year of my birth.*

De Excidio Britanniae describes the battle as such an "unexpected recovery of the [island]" that it caused kings, nobles, priests, and commoners to "live orderly according to their several vocations." Afterwards, the long peace degenerated into civil wars and the iniquity of Maelgwn Gwynedd.

That Arthur had gone unmentioned by Gildas, ostensibly the source closest to his own time, was noticed at least as early as a 12th-century hagiography of Gildas which claims that Gildas had praised Arthur extensively but then excised him completely after Arthur killed the saint's brother, Hueil mab Caw. Modern writers have suggested the details of the battle may have been so well known that Gildas expected his audience to be familiar with them.

The battle is next mentioned in an 8th-century text of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (*Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*), which describes the "siege of Mount Badon, when they made no small slaughter of those invaders," as occurring 44 years after the first Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain. Bede refers to Ambrosius Aurelianus as the leader of the Britons at that battle, whose parents had perished 'in the storm' and who were 'of the royal race'. Since Bede places that arrival just before, during or just after the joint reign in Rome of Marcian and Valentinian III in AD 449–456, he must have considered Badon to have taken place between 493 and 500. Bede then puts off discussion of the battle – "But more of this hereafter" – only to seemingly never return to it.

Bede does later include an extended account of Saint Germanus of Auxerre's victory over the Saxons and Picts in a mountain valley (traditionally placed at Mold in Flintshire in northeast Wales), which he credits with curbing the threat of invasion for a generation. However, as the victory is described as having been accomplished bloodlessly, it was presumably a different occasion from Badon. Accepted at face value, Saint Germanus' involvement would also place the battle around AD 430, although Bede's chronology shows no knowledge of this.

The earliest surviving text specifically mentioning Arthur in connection with the battle is the early 9th-century *Historia Brittonum* (*The History of the Britons*), attributed to the Welsh monk Nennius, in which the soldier (Latin *mīles*) Arthur is identified as the leader of the victorious British force at Badon:

> *The twelfth battle was on Mount Badon in which there fell in one day 960 men from one charge by Arthur; and no one struck them down except Arthur himself.*

The Battle of Badon is next mentioned in the *Annales Cambriae* (*Annals of Wales*), assumed to have been written during the mid- to late-10th century. The entry states:

> *The Battle of Badon, in which Arthur carried the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ for three days and three nights upon his shoulders [or shield] and the Britons were the victors.*

Geoffrey of Monmouth's c. 1136 *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*The History of the Kings of Britain*) was massively popular and survives in many copies from soon after its composition. Going into (and fabricating) much greater detail, Geoffrey closely identifies Badon with Bath, including having Merlin foretell that Badon's baths would lose their hot water and turn poisonous. He also mixes in aspects of other accounts: the battle begins as a Saxon siege and then becomes a normal engagement once Arthur's men arrive; Arthur bears the image of the Virgin both on his shield and shoulder. Arthur charges and kills 470, ten more than the number of Britons ambushed by Hengist near Salisbury.

Elements of the Welsh legends are added: in addition to the shield *Pridwen*, Arthur gains his sword, *Caliburnus* (Excalibur), and his spear, *Ron*. Geoffrey also makes the defence of the city from the Saxon sneak attack a holy cause, having Dubricius offer absolution of all sins for those who fall in battle.

Scholarship

There is considerable scholarly debate as to the exact date and location of the battle, though most agree that it took place in southern England sometime around the turn of the sixth century.

Dates proposed by scholars for the battle include 493, 501 and 516. Daniel McCarthy and Dáibhí Ó Cróinín have posited that Gildas' 44 years and one month is not a reference to the simple chronology but a position within the 84-year Easter cycle used for computus at the time by the Britons and the Irish church. The tables in question begin in January 438, which would place their revised date of the battle in February 482.

Andrew Breeze, in a 2020 book, argues that the Battle of Badon or "Braydon, Wiltshire" took place in 493, deducing that Gildas was writing *De Excidio* in 536, in the middle of the extreme weather events of 535–536, because he cited a "certain thick mist and black night" which "sits upon the whole island" of Britain, but not the subsequent famine in the year 537. Breeze concluded that Badon was fought "(...) in southern Britain, was fought in 493 and had nothing to do with Arthur."

Though academics have never reached any consensus, Mount Badon's location has traditionally been sited in the hills around Bath, most notably at Bathampton Down. Tim and Annette Burkitt have proposed Caer Badden (Latin: *Aquae Sulis*; now Bath, Somerset), some 20 miles northeast of the Roman mines at Charterhouse, on the basis of the *Welsh Annals* as well as archaeological and toponymic evidence.

Susan Hirst, Geoffrey Ashe and Michael Wood argue for the site of Liddington Castle on the hill above Badbury (Old English: *Baddan byrig*) in Wiltshire west of Swindon. This site, an Iron Age hill fort with signs of sub-Roman occupation, commands The Ridgeway, which connects the River Thames with the River Avon and River Severn beyond. From a very different etymological approach, Andrew Breeze also put forward a site near Swindon: arguing that *Badon* must be etymologically Brythonic rather than English (thus eliminating Bath from consideration as its name is entirely Germanic) and that Gildas's toponym (*Badonici Montis*) is a corruption of *Bradonici Montis*, Breeze posits Ringsbury Camp near Braydon northwest of Swindon as the site of the battle.

The similarly named Badbury Rings in Dorset have also been argued to be the location of the battle. David Cooper agrees that this is the most likely site and has provided the most comprehensive analysis of the battle available to date.

Some authors have speculated that Ælle of Sussex may have led the Saxon forces at this battle. Others reject the idea out of hand. In book 9 of his work *Historia regum Britanniae*, Geoffrey of Monmouth mentions a certain Cheldric as Saxon war leader who fought at Bath during the same period, so other scholars suggest that (due to similarities of names) Cerdic of Wessex was the Saxon leader during the battle.

Second Badon

The A Text of the *Annales Cambriae* includes the entry: "The first celebration of Easter among the Saxons. The second battle of Badon. Morgan dies." The date for this action is given by Phillimore as AD 665, but the Saxons' first Easter is placed by the B Text in its entry 634 years after the birth of Christ and "the second Badon" is not mentioned.

Romance depiction

The 13th-century Vulgate Cycle, a French prose romance retelling of the Arthurian legend, replaced the Battle of Badon with the Battle of Clarence (spelling variants: *Clarance*, *Clarans*, *Clarenche*, *Clarens*). In the first round of fighting, a coalition of British kings is defeated by the Saxons (or the Saracens in some subsequent versions, including that by Thomas Malory). In the second phase, Arthur joins the battle and enemy forces are destroyed, driving invaders into the sea.

Local lore

Apart from the professional scholarship, various communities throughout Wales and England have their own traditions maintaining that their area was the site of the battle. These include (besides Badbury Rings and Bathampton Down), the mountain of Mynydd Baedan near Maesteg in South Wales, and Bowden Hill in Wiltshire.

Modern depictions

King Arthur leads the Knights of the Round Table into battle against the Saxons led by Hengist in the *Prince Valiant* comic strip series episodes 1430 (5 July 1964) and following. The battle is mentioned in the 1975 comedy film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* as one of the many questionable feats of Sir Robin, who in the film's bardic narration is said to have "personally wet himself at the Battle of Badon Hill". The battle is featured prominently in 1997's *Excalibur: A Novel of Arthur* by Bernard Cornwell, in the book's second part, "Mynydd Baddon", in which the armies of Angle and Saxon kings Aelle and Cerdic, aided by Celtic traitors led by Lancelot, are defeated in an epic battle by an uneasy alliance of various British and Irish kingdoms. The author combines various medieval accounts of the battle, such as it beginning as an Anglo-Saxon siege of a hilltop (here initially desperately defended by Guinevere, who is depicted as a brilliant strategist and rallying figure) and having Arthur's cavalry appear with the sign of the cross on their shields (here a requisite demanded by the Christian king Tewdric for him to also join the battle), to create a more grounded and realistic depiction than the ones from his medieval sources. The 2004 film *King Arthur* ends in a climactic battle scene occurring along Hadrian's Wall as the mostly Romano-British forces of Arthur defeat those of the Saxon kings Cerdic and Cynric, at a heavy cost to Arthur.

BATTLE OF CAMLANN

The Battle of Camlann (Welsh: *Gwaith Camlan* or *Brwydr Camlan*) is the legendary final battle of King Arthur, in which Arthur either died or was mortally wounded while fighting either alongside or against Mordred, who also perished. The original legend of Camlann, inspired by a purportedly historical event said to have taken place in the early 6th-century Britain, is only vaguely described in several medieval Welsh texts dating from around the 10th century. The battle's much more detailed depictions have emerged since the 12th century, generally based on that of a catastrophic conflict described in the pseudo-chronicle *Historia Regum Britanniae*. The further greatly embellished variants originate from the later French chivalric romance tradition, in which it became known as the Battle of Salisbury, and include the 15th-century telling in *Le Morte d'Arthur* that remains popular today.

The name may derive from a Brittonic **Cambo-landa* ("crooked/twisting-enclosure" or "crooked/twisting open land"), or (less likely) **Cambo-glanna* ("crooked/twisting bank (of a river)"), as found in the name of the Roman fort of Camboglanna (Castlesteads) in Cumbria.

The earliest dateable reference to the battle is found in the 10th-century Welsh annals *Annales Cambriae*. An entry for the year 537 mentions the "strife of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut fell, and there was great mortality in Britain and Ireland."[a] This is also the first written mention of Medraut (the later Mordred), but it does not specify whether he and Arthur fought on the same side or who won the battle.

Andrew Breeze (2020) argues that the battle is historical, and it was an aftermath of the famine associated by the documented extreme weather events of 535–536, which caused, in the words of the *Annales Cambriae*, "great mortality in Britain and Ireland". He interprets Camlann as a cattle raid on central Britain; Breeze cites R. G. Collingwood, to the effect that an identification of Camlann with "Camboglanna on Hadrian's Wall" was "convincing". Discussing further indications suggesting Camlann as Castlesteads, near Carlisle, Breeze concludes: "There is every reason to think that, in 537, when the walls of this stronghold stood high [...], Arthur was killed [there] by men of Rheged, the British kingdom centred on Penrith." Flint Johnson disagrees with Breeze's interpretation of Camlann as a cattle raid, but also agrees that the battle was historical and that the causes would have been political, although the date is still uncertain. Johnson concluded: "The most reasonable reason why Arthur's death was associated with 537 is because as a king he was associated with the fertility of his kingdom and 537 was a period of famine. It would have made perfect sense to a medieval scholar with a British cultural background that the death of a renowned king had caused [that]."

However, other historians regard Arthur and the Battle of Camlann as legendary. Nick Higham argued that, as Camlann is not mentioned in the list of Arthur's battles in the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*, the source of the *Annales Cambriae* entry was probably an Old Welsh elegy or lament about a different Arthur, perhaps one listed in the genealogy of the kings of Dyfed. Historian and broadcaster Michael Wood takes a more nuanced view: that Arthur's historicity "is possible", noting that the entry on Camlann is written in a terse style unlike the other mention of Arthur (at Badon), and is linguistically similar to other, unsuspect passages of the *Annales*, perhaps offering "genuine testimony for Arthur's existence".

Besides the *Annales Cambriae*, one of the earliest mentions of Camlann is found in the circa 9th/10th-century *Englynion y Beddau* ("Stanzas of the Graves", Stanza 12) from the *Black Book of Carmarthen*, as the site of the grave of Osfran's son. The Welsh prose text *Culhwch and Olwen*, dated to the 11th or 12th century, mentions the battle twice in connection to heroes who fought there. The text includes a triad naming Morfran ail Tegid, Sandde Bryd Angel, and Cynwyl Sant as the three men who survived Camlann: Morfran because of his fearsome ugliness, Sandde because of his angelic beauty, and Cynwyl because he left Arthur last. This triad shows that Camlann was famous as a battle that few survived. Caitlin Green suggests that "Osfran's son" from the *Englynion y Beddau* is connected to Morfran from *Culhwch and Olwen*. The text also mentions Gwyn Hywar, overseer of Cornwall and Devon, one of the nine men who plotted the Battle of Camlann, suggesting a now-lost tradition of complex intrigue underpinning Arthur's last battle.

The Welsh Triads offer clues to the alleged cause of the Battle of Camlann. Triad 51 largely reflects (and is derived from) Geoffrey (see below): Medrawd (Mordred) rebels against Arthur while the latter is campaigning on the continent and usurps the throne, instigating the battle. Triad 53 lists a slap Gwenhwyvach gave to her sister Gwenhwyfar (Guinevere), wife of Arthur, as one of the "Three Harmful Blows of the Island of Britain", causing the Strife of Camlann. Calling Camlann one of Britain's "Three Futile Battles", Triad 84 also mentions this dispute between sisters. Triad 54 describes Medrawd raiding Arthur's court, throwing Gwenhwyfar to the ground and beating her. Other Triads in which Camlann is mentioned include Triad 30 ("Three Faithless War Bands") and Triad 59 ("Three Unfortunate Counsels").

Camlann is mentioned in Peniarth MS.37, a 14th-century copy of the Gwentian code of the Cyfraith Hywel (Welsh law), which (according to Peter Bartrum) shows that it was a topic familiar to Welsh writers. The law states "when the queen shall will a song in the chamber, let the bard sing a song respecting Camlan, and that not loud, lest the hall be disturbed." The 15th/16th-century poet Tudur Aled says that the battle came about through the treachery of Medrod and happened "about two nuts". In the 13th/14th-century Welsh tale *The Dream of Rhonabwy*, the immediate cause of the battle is a deliberate provocation by Arthur's rogue peace envoy named Iddawg (Iddawc Cordd Prydain) who intentionally insulted Medrawd.

Geoffrey of Monmouth included the Battle of Camlann in his pseudo-historical chronicle *Historia Regum Britanniae*, written circa 1136. Geoffrey's version drew on existing Welsh tradition, but embellished the account with invented details. His focus was not on individuals but the 'character of the British nation'. In Books X and IX, Arthur goes to war against the Roman leader Lucius Tiberius, leaving his nephew Modredus (Mordred) in charge of Britain. In Arthur's absence, Modredus secretly marries Arthur's wife Guenhuvara (Guinevere) and takes the throne for himself. Arthur returns and his army faces Modredus' at Camblana (the River Camel in Cornwall). Many are killed, including Modredus; Arthur is mortally wounded and taken to the Isle of Avalon to recover, passing the crown to his kinsman Constantine.

Geoffrey's work was highly influential, and was adapted into various other languages, including Wace's Anglo-Norman *Roman de Brut* (c. 1155), Layamon's Middle English *Brut* (early 13th century), and the Welsh *Brut y Brenhinedd* (mid-13th century). Various later works are based fairly closely on Geoffrey, including the Middle English Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, written around 1400. The chronicle tradition typically follows Geoffrey in placing Camlann on the Camel in Cornwall: Wace places it at "Camel, over against the entrance to Cornwall," and Layamon specifies the location as Camelford, where John Aubrey reports that as signs of the battle "pieces of armour both for horse and man are many times found in digging of the ground" in his *Monumenta Britannica* (1663–1693). In Layamon's telling, only Arthur and his two nameless knights are left alive after the battle. Wace wrote: "I neither know who lost, nor who gained that day. No man wists the name of overthrower or of overthrown. All alike are forgotten, the victor with him who died."

Further traditions about Arthur's final battle are developed in the Arthurian chivalric romances. These often follow Geoffrey's blueprint, but alter many of the details. The legend shifts to the 'character of individuals' and the proposed adultery between Guinevere and Lancelot is first mentioned.

In the Vulgate *Mort Artu*, part of the French Lancelot-Grail (Vulgate) cycle, Arthur goes to France not to fight the Romans, but to pursue his former prime knight Lancelot, who had engaged in an affair with Guinevere and killed Arthur's nephews (Mordred's and Gawain's siblings) Agravain, Gaheris and Gareth. He leaves Mordred in charge of Britain when he departs, only for Mordred to betray him and seize the throne. Arthur brings his veteran army back to Britain, where they meet Mordred's forces outnumbering them two-to-one with his British supporters and foreign allies (Saxon and Irish) at Salisbury Plain in south central England (Camlann is not mentioned). The fighting begins by an accident of fate, when a startled knight draws his sword to kill an adder during the standoff negotiations between Mordred and Arthur. After great numbers die on both sides (including several other kings and most of the Knights of the Round Table remaining after the Grail Quest), Arthur kills Mordred in a duel, but is himself mortally wounded. The dying Arthur tasks his knight (depending on the telling, either Griflet or Bedivere) with returning his sword Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake, and he is then taken to Avalon. The *Mort Artu* narration laments that the brutal and bloody battle resulted in the deaths of so many that, afterwards, Arthur's "kingdom of Logres was doomed to destruction, and many others [in Britain] with it."

This account of Arthur's last battle was adapted into many subsequent works of the period from 13th to 15th century, including the Old French Post-Vulgate Cycle (in which Arthur refuses to make peace with Mordred), the Middle English Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, and Thomas Malory's influential Middle English work *Le Mort d'Arthur*. These works almost all locate the battle at Salisbury. The *Didot-Perceval* uniquely locates it at a Saxon-ruled island in Ireland where Mordred had taken refuge while pursued by Arthur. In the Italian *La Tavola Ritonda*, Mordred is actually victorious as he survives Arthur's death in their battle and then becomes the new king, only to be later defeated by Lancelot.

In a popular motif, introduced by Geoffrey in *Historia* and elaborated in his later *Vita Merlini*, Arthur was then taken from the battlefield of Camlann to Avalon, an often otherworldly and magical isle, in hope that he could be saved. Geoffrey has Arthur delivered to Morgen (Morgan le Fay) in Avalon by Taliesin guided by Barinthus, replaced by two unnamed women in the *Brut*. Later authors of the prose cycles featured Morgan herself (usually with two or more other ladies with her) arriving in a fairy boat to take the king away, the scene made iconic through its inclusion in *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

Some accounts, such as the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, as well as the commentary by Gerald of Wales, declare that Arthur died in Avalon (identifying it as Glastonbury Tor) and has been buried there. Geoffrey gives only a hopeful possibility (but not assurance) for Arthur's wounds to be healed eventually, but a successful revival of Arthur by Morgan is stated as a fact in the rewrite of Geoffrey in the *Gesta Regum Britanniae*; Wace and Layamon also tell this did happen, claiming that Arthur is about to return. Other versions, like the Vulgate *Mort Artu* and Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, do not give a definitive answer to Arthur's ultimate fate.

AVALON

Avalon (/ˈævəlɒn/) is an island featured in the Arthurian legend. It first appeared in Geoffrey of Monmouth's 1136 *Historia Regum Britanniae* as a place of magic where King Arthur's sword Excalibur was made and later where Arthur was taken to recover from being gravely wounded at the Battle of Camlann. Since then, the island has become a symbol of Arthurian mythology, similar to Arthur's castle of Camelot.

Avalon was associated from an early date with mystical practices and magical figures such as King Arthur's sorceress sister Morgan, cast as the island's ruler by Geoffrey and many later authors. Certain Briton traditions have maintained that Arthur is an eternal king who had never truly died but would return as the "once and future" king. The particular motif of his rest in Morgan's care in Avalon has become especially popular. It can be found in various versions in many French and other medieval Arthurian and other works written in the wake of Geoffrey, some of them also linking Avalon with the legend of the Holy Grail.

Avalon has often been identified as the former island of Glastonbury Tor. An early and long-standing belief involves the purported discovery of Arthur's remains and their later grand reburial, in accordance with the medieval English tradition in which Arthur did not survive the fatal injuries he suffered in his final battle. Besides Glastonbury, several other alternative locations of Avalon have also been claimed or proposed. Many medieval sources also localized the place in Sicily, and European folklore connected it with the phenomenon of Fata Morgana.

Etymology

The meaning and origin of the name Avalon have been long debated by Arthurian scholars as well as Celtic and Romance philologists. Geoffrey of Monmouth in his pseudo-chronicle *Historia Regum Britanniae* ("The History of the Kings of Britain", c. 1136) calls the place *Insula Avallonis*, meaning the "Isle of Avallon" in Latin. In his later *Vita Merlini* ("The Life of Merlin", c. 1150), he calls it *Insula Pomorum*, the "Isle of Fruit Trees" (from Latin *pōmus* "fruit tree"). Today, the name is generally considered to be of Welsh origin (a Cornish or Breton origin is also possible), from Old Welsh, Old Cornish, or Old Breton *aball* or *avallen(n)*, "apple tree, fruit tree" (cf. Welsh *afal*, from Proto-Celtic **abalnā*, literally "fruit-bearing (thing)").

The tradition of an "apple" island among the ancient Britons may also be related to Irish legends of the otherworld island home of Manannán mac Lir and Lugh, Emain Ablach (also the Old Irish poetic name for Isle of Man), where *Ablach* means "Having Apple Trees"— from Old Irish *aball* ("apple") — and is similar to the Middle Welsh name *Afallach*, which was used to replace the name Avalon in medieval Welsh translations of French and Latin Arthurian tales. All are related to the Gaulish root **aballo* "fruit tree" (found in the place name Aballo/Aballone) and are derived from Proto-Celtic **abal-* "apple", which is related at the Indo-European level to English *apple*, Russian *яблоко* (*jabloko*), Latvian *ābele*, et al.

In the early 12th century, William of Malmesbury claimed the name of Avalon came from a man called Avalloc, who once lived on this isle with his daughters. Gerald of Wales similarly derived the name of Avalon from its purported former ruler, Avallo. The name is also similar to "Avallus", described by Pliny the Elder in his 1st-century *Naturalis Historia* as a mysterious island where amber could be found.

Legend

According to Geoffrey in the *Historia*, and much subsequent literature which he inspired, King Arthur was taken to Avalon (*Avallon*) in hope that he could be saved and recover from his mortal wounds following the tragic Battle of Camlann. Geoffrey first mentions Avalon as the place where Arthur's sword Excalibur (*Caliburn*) was forged.

Geoffrey dealt with the subject in more detail in the *Vita Merlini*, in which he describes for the first time in Arthurian legend the fairy or fae-like enchantress Morgen (i.e. Morgan) as the chief of nine sisters (including Moronoe, Mazoe, Gliten, Glitonea, Gliton, Tyronoe and Thiten) who together rule Avalon. Geoffrey's telling, in the in-story narration by the bard Taliesin to Merlin, indicates a sea voyage was needed to get there. The description of Avalon, which is heavily indebted to the early medieval Spanish scholar Isidore of Seville (having been mostly derived from the section on famous islands in Isidore's work *Etymologiae*, XIV.6.8 "*Fortunatae Insulae*"), shows the magical nature of the island:

The Isle of Fruit Trees which men call the Fortunate Isle (*Insula Pomorum quae Fortunata uocatur*) gets its name from the fact that it produces all things of itself; the fields there have no need of the ploughs of the farmers and all cultivation is lacking except what nature provides. Of its own accord it produces grain and grapes, and apple trees grow in its woods from the close-clipped grass. The ground of its own accord produces everything instead of merely grass, and people live there a hundred years or more. There nine sisters rule by a pleasing set of laws those who come to them from our country.

In Layamon's *Brut* version of the *Historia*, Arthur is taken to Avalon to be healed there through means of magic water by a distinctively Anglo-Saxon version of Morgen: an elf queen of Avalon named Argante. In the *Didot-Perceval*, Perceval's Grail Quest adventures include him fighting a flock of ravens that turn out to be fairy maidens from Avalon, sisters of the wife of one Urbain of the Black Thorn, in a story likely representing Geoffrey's shapeshifting Morgen and her sisters as inspired by the Welsh Modron (Urbain thus being Modron's husband Urien) and possibly also influenced by the Irish Mórrigan. [Geoffrey's Merlin not only never visits Avalon but is not even aware of its existence, until told about it after Arthur's delivery there by Taliesin. This would change to various degrees in the later Arthurian prose romance tradition that expanded on Merlin's association with Arthur, as well on the subject of Avalon itself.

In many versions of Arthurian legend, including Thomas Malory's compilation *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Morgan the Fairy and several other magical queens (numbering either three, four, or "many") arrive after the battle to take the mortally wounded Arthur from the battlefield of Camlann (Salisbury Plain in the romances) to Avalon in a black boat. Besides Morgan, who by this time had already become Arthur's supernatural sibling in the popular romance tradition, they sometimes come with the Lady of the Lake among them. The others may include the Queen of Northgales (North Wales) and the Queen of the Wasteland. In the Vulgate *Queste*, Morgan tells Arthur of her intention to relocate to Avalon, "where the ladies who know all the magic in the world are" (*ou les dames sont qui seiuent tous les enchantemens del monde* [*sic*]), not long before his final battle. Its Welsh version also claims, within its text, to be a translation of old Latin books from Avalon, as does the French *Perlesvaus*. In Lope Garcia de Salazar's Spanish summary of the Post-

Vulgate *Roman du Graal*, Avalon is conflated with (and explicitly named as) the mythological Island of Brasil, said to be located west of Ireland and afterwards forever hidden in mist by Morgan's enchantment.

In some texts, Arthur's fate in Avalon is left untold or uncertain. In the *Vera historia de morte Arthuri* ("True story of the death of Arthur"), for instance, Arthur is taken by four of his men to Avalon in the land of Gwynedd (north-west Wales), where he is about to die but then mysteriously disappears in a mist amongst sudden great storm. *Lanzelet* tells of Loholt (*Loüt*) having left with Arthur to Avalon "whence the Bretons still expect both of them evermore." Other times, Arthur's eventual death is explicitly confirmed, as it happens in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, where the Archbishop of Canterbury later receives the dead king's body from Morgan and buries it at Glastonbury. In the telling from Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, relatively devoid of supernatural elements, it is not Morgan but the renowned physicians from Salerno who try, and fail, to save Arthur's life in Avalon.[39] Conversely, the *Gesta Regum Britanniae*, an early rewrite of Geoffrey's *Historia*, states (in the present tense) that Morgan "keeps his healed body for her very own and they now live together." In a similar narrative, the chronicle *Draco Normannicus* contains a fictional letter from King Arthur to Henry II of England, claiming Arthur having been healed of his wounds and made immortal by his "deathless (eternal) nymph" sister Morgan in the holy island of Avalon (*Avallonis eas insula sacra*) through the island's miraculous herbs. This is reminiscent of the British tradition mentioned by Gervase of Tilbury as having Morgan still healing Arthur's wounds opening annually ever since on the Isle of Avalon (*Davalim*). In the *Didot-Perceval*, Arthur's sister Morgan is left to tends his mortal wounds in Avalon while the Britons wait for him (as told by him to do) for 40 years before electing another king. The author then adds that some people still hope that Arthur did not die and would return as he had promised, and tells of a legend according to which he has been seen since out hunting in the forests.

Morgan features as an immortal ruler of a fantastic Avalon, sometimes alongside the still-alive Arthur, in some subsequent and otherwise non-Arthurian chivalric romances such as *Tirant lo Blanch*, as well as the tales of Huon of Bordeaux, where the faery king Oberon is a son of either Morgan by name or "the Lady of the Secret Isle", and the legend of Ogier the Dane,[where Avalon can be described as an enchanted fairy castle (*chasteu d'Auallon*), as it is also in *Floriant et Florete*. In his *La Faula*, Guillem de Torroella claims to have visited the Enchanted Island (*Illa Encantada*) and met Arthur who has been brought back to life by Morgan and they both of them are now forever young, sustained by the Holy Grail. In *La Bataille Loquifer*, Morgan and her sister Marsion bring the hero Renoart to Avalon, where Arthur now prepares his return alongside Morgan, Gawain, Ywain, Perceval and Guinevere. Such stories, which also include *Lion de Bourges*, *Mabrien*, *Tristan de Nanteuil*, and others, typically take place centuries after the times of King Arthur. According to William W. Kibler,

In the wake of *Huon de Bordeaux*, the hero's adventure in fairyland became practically *de rigueur* in the later *chansons de geste*. These adventures are all cut from the same mould and serve a common purpose: as qualifying experiences for the hero. They allow the author to confirm in the Other World what is already manifest in this one, and often to relaunch the hero on his quest. The Arthurian world evoked is that of Avalon after Arthur's disappearance, whether or not it is explicitly named. Except in *Lion de Bourges* it is located vaguely in the east and sometimes upon an island. The characters are invariably Arthur and his sister Morgan, with accompanying fairies, but, except in *La Bataille Loquifer* and *Ogier*, no other Knights of the Round Table. Arthur himself assumes magical powers in these works, replacing in this sense Merlin, who is never explicitly evoked. Arthur is no longer the head of the Round Table, but the master of an ethereal kingdom populated with fairies and spirits.

In *Perlesvaus*, the bodies of Guinevere and her young son Loholt are already buried in Avalon by Arthur himself during his reign. *Erec and Enide*, an early Arthurian romance by Chrétien de Troyes, mentions at the wedding of Arthur and Guinevere a "friend" (i.e. lover) of Morgan as the Lord of the Isle of Avalon, Guingomar (manuscript variants *Guinguemar*, *Guingamar*, *Guigomar*, *Guilemer*, *Gimoers*). In this appearance, he might have been derived from the fairy king Gwyn ap Nudd, who in the Welsh Arthurian tradition figures as the ruler of Avalon-like Celtic Otherworld, Annwn. The German *Diu Crône* says the Queen of Avalon is the goddess (*göttin*) Enfeidas, Arthur's aunt (sister of Uther Pendragon) and one of the guardians of the Grail. In Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*, Petitcrieu is a magical dog created by a goddess in Avalon. The Venician *Les Prophéties de Merlin* features the character of an enchantress known only as the Lady of Avalon (*Dame d'Avalon*), a Merlin's apprentice who is a fierce rival of Morgan as well as of Sebile, another of Merlin's female students. In the late Italian *Tavola Ritonda*, the lady of the island of Avalon (*dama dell'isola di Vallone*, likely the same as the Lady of Avalon from the *Propheties*) is a fairy mother of the evil sorceress Elergia. An unnamed Lady of the Isle of Avalon (named as Lady Lyle of Avalon by Malory) appears indirectly in the Vulgate Cycle story of Sir Balin in which her damsel brings a cursed magic sword to Camelot. The tales of the half-fairy Melusine have her grow up in the isle of Avalon.

Avalon has been also occasionally described as a valley. In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, for instance, Avalon is called an isle twice and a vale once (the latter in the scene of Arthur's final voyage, oddly despite Malory's adoption of the boat travel motif). Notably, the vale of Avalon (*vaus d'Avaron*) is mentioned twice in Robert de Boron's Arthurian prequel *Joseph d'Arimathie* [fr] as a place located in western Britannia, to where a fellowship of early Christians started by Joseph of Arimathea brought the Grail after its long journey from the Holy Land, finally delivered there by Bron, the first Fisher King.

In his final romance, *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, Chrétien de Troyes featured the sea fortress of Escavalon, ruled by the unspecified King of Escavalon. The name Escavalon might be simply a corruption of the word Avalon that can be literally translated as "Water-Avalon", albeit some scholars proposed various other developments of the name Escavalon from that of Avalon (with Roger Sherman Loomis noting the similarity of the evolution of Geoffrey's Caliburn into the Chrétien's Escalibur in the case of Excalibur[68]), perhaps in connection with the Old French words for either Slav or Saracen. Chretien's Escavalon was renamed as Askalon in *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach, who might have been either confused or inspired by the real-life Middle Eastern coastal city of Ascalon.

It is possible that the Chrétien-era Escavalon has turned or split into the Grail realm of Escalot in later prose romances. Nevertheless, the kingdoms of Escalot and Escavalon both appear concurrently in the Vulgate Cycle. There, Escavalon is ruled by King Alain, whose daughter Florée is rescued by Gawain and later gives birth to his son Guinglain (and possibly two others). The character of Alain may have been derived from Afallach (Avallach) of Avalon.

Though no longer an island in the 12th century, the high conical bulk of Glastonbury Tor in today's South-West England. Today, it is a rock outcrop in the town of Glastonbury, situated about 15 miles (25 kilometres) from the sea, but had been surrounded by marsh before the draining of fenland in the Somerset Levels. In ancient times, Ponter's Ball Dyke would have guarded the only entrance to the island. The Romans eventually built another road to the island. Glastonbury's earliest name in Welsh was the Isle of Glass, which suggests that the location was at one point seen as an island. At the end of the 12th century, Gerald of Wales wrote in *De instructione principis*:

What is now known as Glastonbury was, in ancient times, called the Isle of Avalon. It is virtually an island, for it is completely surrounded by marshlands. In Welsh it is called *Ynys Afallach*, which means the Island of Apples and this fruit once grew in great abundance. After the Battle of Camlann, a noblewoman called Morgan, later the ruler and patroness of these parts as well as being a close blood-relation of King Arthur, carried him off to the island, now known as Glastonbury, so that his wounds could be cared for. Years ago the district had also been called *Ynys Gutrin* in Welsh, that is the Island of Glass, and from these words the invading Saxons later coined the place-name "Glastingebury".

Around 1190, monks at Glastonbury Abbey claimed to have discovered the bones of Arthur and his wife Guinevere. The discovery of the burial is described by chroniclers, notably Gerald, as being just after King Henry II's reign when the new abbot of Glastonbury, Henry de Sully, commissioned a search of the abbey grounds. At a depth of 5 m (16 feet), the monks were said to have discovered an unmarked tomb with a massive treetrunk coffin and, also buried, a lead cross bearing the inscription:

HIC IACET SEPVLTVS INCLTVS REX ARTVRIVS IN INSVLA AVALONIA

"Here lies entombed the renowned king Arthur in the island of Avalon"

Accounts of the exact inscription vary, with five different versions existing. One popular today, made famous by Malory, claims "Here lies Arthur, the king that was and the king that shall be" (*Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam rexque futurus*), also known in the now-popular variant "the once and future king" (*rex quondam et futurus*). The earliest is by Gerald in *Liber de Principis instructione* c. 1193, who wrote that he viewed the cross in person and traced the lettering. His transcript reads: "Here lies buried the famous *Arthurus* with *Wenneveria* his second wife in the isle of Avalon" (*Hic jacet sepultus inclitus rex Arthurus cum Wenneveria uxore sua secunda in insula Avallonia*). He wrote that in the coffin were two bodies, whom Giraldus refers to as Arthur and "his queen"; the male body's bones were described as gigantic. The account of the burial by the chronicle of Margam Abbey says three bodies were found, the other being that of Mordred; Richard Barber argues that Mordred's name was airbrushed out of the story once his reputation as a traitor was appreciated.

The story is today seen as an example of pseudoarchaeology. Historians generally dismiss the find's authenticity, attributing it to a publicity stunt performed to raise funds to rebuild the Abbey after it had been destroyed by a 1184 fire. Leslie Alcock in his *Arthur's Britain* postulated a theory according to which the grave site had been originally discovered in an ancient mausoleum sometime after 945 by Dunstan, the Abbot of Glastonbury, who reburied it along with the 10th-century stone cross; it would then become forgotten again until its rediscovery in 1190.

In 1278, the remains were reburied with great ceremony, attended by King Edward I and Queen Eleanor of Castile, before the High Altar at Glastonbury Abbey. They were moved again in 1368 when the choir was extended. The site became the focus of pilgrimages until the dissolution of the abbey in 1539. The fact that the search for the body is connected to Henry II and Edward I, both kings who fought major Anglo-Welsh wars, has had scholars suggest that propaganda may have played a part as well. Gerald was a constant supporter of royal authority; in his account of the discovery aims to quash the idea of the possibility of King Arthur's messianic return:

Many tales are told and many legends have been invented about King Arthur and his mysterious ending. In their stupidity the British [i.e. Welsh, Cornish and Breton] people maintain that he is still alive. Now that the truth is known, I have taken the trouble to add a few more details in this present chapter. The fairy-tales have been snuffed out, and the true and indubitable facts are made known, so that what really happened must be made crystal clear to all and separated from the myths which have accumulated on the subject.

The burial discovery ensured that in later romances, histories based on them and in the popular imagination, Glastonbury became increasingly identified with Avalon, an identification that continues strongly today. The later development of the legends of the Holy Grail and Joseph of Arimathea interconnected these legends with Glastonbury and with Avalon, an identification which also seems to be made in *Perlesvaus*. The popularity of Arthurian romances has meant this area of the Somerset Levels has today become popularly described as the Vale of Avalon.

Modern writers such as Dion Fortune, John Michell, Nicholas Mann and Geoffrey Ashe have formed theories based on perceived links between Glastonbury and Celtic legends of the Otherworld in attempts to link the location firmly with Avalon, drawing on the various legends based on Glastonbury Tor as well as drawing on ideas like Earth mysteries, ley lines and even the myth of Atlantis. Arthurian literature also continues to use Glastonbury as an important location as in *The Mists of Avalon*, *A Glastonbury Romance*, and *The Bones of Avalon*. Even the fact that Somerset has many apple orchards has been drawn in to support the connection. Glastonbury's reputation as the real Avalon has made it a popular site of tourism. Having become one of the major New Age communities in Europe, the area has great religious significance for neo-Pagans and modern Druids, as well as some Christians. Identification of Glastonbury with Avalon within hippie subculture, as seen in the work of Michell and in the Gandalf's Garden community, also helped inspire the annual Glastonbury Festival

Medieval settings for the location of Avalon ranged far beyond Glastonbury. Besides the mentioned examples of Gwynedd and Brasil, they included paradisal underworld realms equated with the other side of the Earth at the antipodes. Italian romances and folklore explicitly link Morgan's and sometimes Arthur's eternal domain with Mount Etna (Mongibel) in Sicily, and the Strait of Messina, located to the north of Etna and associated with the optical mirage phenomenon of Fata Morgana ("Morgan the Fairy"). Pomponius Mela's ancient Roman description of the island of Île de Sein, off the coast of Brittany, was also notably one of Geoffrey of Monmouth's original inspirations for his Avalon.

In modern times, similar to the search for Arthur's mythical capital Camelot, a variety of sites across Britain, France and elsewhere have been put forward as being the "real Avalon". Such proposed locations include Greenland or other places in or across the Atlantic, the former Roman fort of Aballava (known as Avalana by the sixth century) in Cumbria, Bardsey Island off the coast of Gwynedd, the isle of Île Aval on the coast of Brittany, and Lady's Island in Ireland's Leinster. In the works of William F. Warren, Avalon was compared to Hyperborea along with the Garden of Eden and theorized to be located in the Arctic. Geoffrey Ashe championed an association of Avalon with the town of Avallon in Burgundy, as part of a theory connecting King Arthur to the Romano-British leader Riothamus who was last seen in that area. Robert Graves identified Avalon with the Spanish island of Majorca (Mallorca), while Laurence Gardner suggested the Isle of Arran off the coast of Scotland. Graham Phillips claimed to have located the grave of the "historical Arthur" (Owain Ddantgwyn) in the "true site of Avalon" on a former island at Baschurch in Shropshire.

PLACE-NAME EVIDENCE

It has been suggested that the place-name Amesbury in Wiltshire might preserve the name of Ambrosius, and that perhaps Amesbury was the seat of his power base in the later fifth century. Scholars such as Shimon Applebaum have found a number of place names through the Midland dialect regions of Britain that incorporate the *ambre-* element; examples include Ombersley in Worcestershire, Ambrosden in Oxfordshire, Amberley in Herefordshire, Amberley in Gloucestershire, and Amberley in West Sussex. These scholars have claimed that this element represents an Old English word *amor*, the name of a woodland bird. However, Amesbury in Wiltshire is in a different dialect region and does not easily fit into the pattern of the Midland dialect place names.

MODERN FICTIONAL TREATMENTS

- Alfred Duggan's *Conscience of the King* (1951), a historical novel about Cerdic, founder of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex, depicts Ambrosius Aurelianus as a Romano-British general who rose independently to military power, forming alliances with various British kings and setting out to drive the invading Saxons from Britain. Cerdic, who is of both Germanic and British descent and raised as a Roman citizen, served in his army as a young man. In the novel, Ambrosius is a separate character from Arthur, or Artorius, who appears much later as a foe of Cerdic.

- In Henry Treece's 1956 *The Great Captains*, Ambrosius is the aged and blind Count of Britain who is deposed by the Celt Artos the Bear after the latter takes his sword of command, Caliburn, and plunges it into a tree stump, daring him to pull it out.

- In Rosemary Sutcliff's 1959 *The Lantern Bearers*, a historical novel for children, Prince Ambrosius Aurelianus of Arfon fights the Saxons by training his British army with Roman techniques and making effective use of cavalry. By the end of the novel, the elite cavalry wing is led by his nephew, a dashing young warrior prince named Artos, whom Sutcliff postulates to be the real Arthur. In the sequel *Sword at Sunset* (1963), Artos eventually succeeds an ailing Ambrosius as High King after he deliberately gets himself killed while hunting.

- Mary Stewart's bestselling 1970 fantasy novel *The Crystal Cave* follows Geoffrey of Monmouth in calling him Aurelius Ambrosius and portrays him as the father of Merlin, younger brother of the assassinated Constantine and older brother of Uther (hence uncle of Arthur), an initiate of Mithras, and admired by everyone except the Saxons. Much of the book is set at his Romanized court in Brittany or during the campaign to retake his throne from Vortigern. He and Merlin both agree that Merlin is not as suited to the High Kingship as Uther, so after Ambrosius' death, Merlin willingly becomes Uther's, then Arthur's, seer and counsellor. Later books in the series show that Merlin's attitude toward Arthur is influenced by his belief that Arthur is a virtual reincarnation of Ambrosius, who is seen through Merlin's eyes as a model of good kingship.

- In Parke Godwin's 1980 historical fantasy novel *Firelord*, Ambrosius is the elderly tribune of the diminished, dispirited and politically fractured Legio VI Victrix garrisoning Hadrian's Wall. Near his death, he names Artorius Pendragon (Arthur) as his successor, encourages him to convert the legion to *alae* (heavy cavalry) and allows the legionnaires to renounce their loyalty to Rome and take personal oaths of fealty to Artorius, in order to help unify Brittania politically and to create a military force with the ability to quickly redeploy to meet differing threats.

- In Marion Zimmer Bradley's 1983 historical fantasy *The Mists of Avalon*, Aurelianus is depicted as the ageing High King of Britain, a "too-ambitious" son of a Western Roman Emperor. His sister's son is Uther Pendragon, but Uther is described as not having any Roman blood. Aurelianus is unable to gather the leadership of the native Celts, who refuse to follow any but their own race.

- In Stephen R. Lawhead's *Pendragon Cycle* (1987-1999), Aurelianus (most often referred to as "Aurelius") figures prominently, along with his brother Uther, in the second book of the series, *Merlin*. He is poisoned soon after becoming High King of Britain, and Uther succeeds him. Lawhead alters the standard Arthurian story somewhat, in that he has Aurelius marry Igraine and become the true father of King Arthur (Uther does marry his brother's widow, though).

- In Jack Whyte's *Camulod Chronicles* (1992-2018), Ambrosius Aurelianus is the half-brother of Caius Merlyn Britannicus (Merlin) and helps him lead the people of Camulod (Camelot).

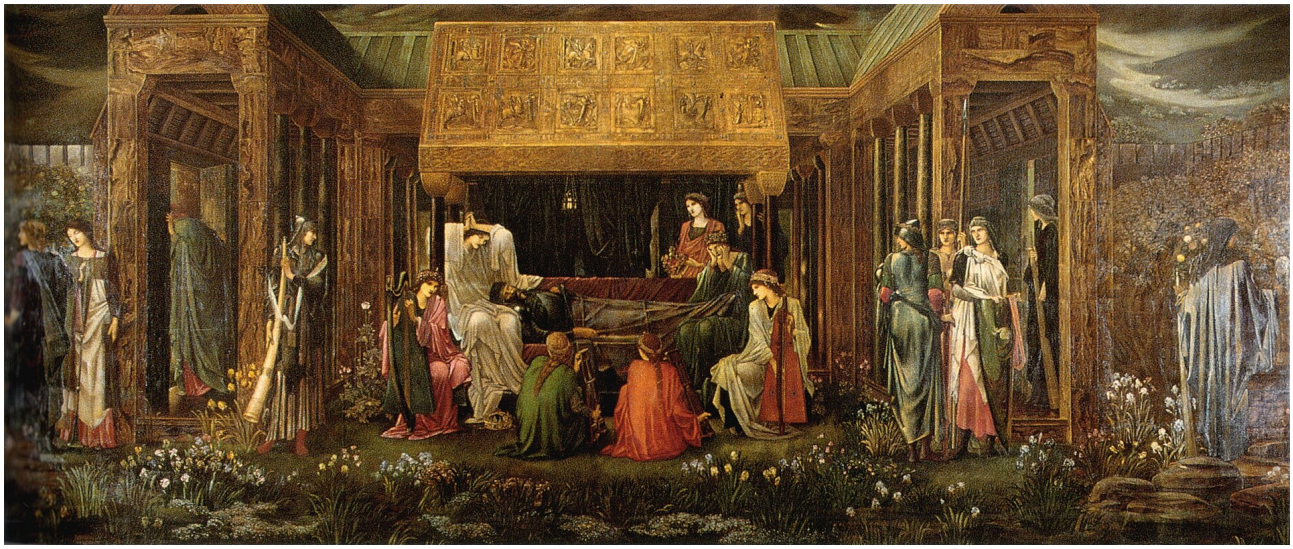
- In Valerio Massimo Manfredi's 2002 novel *The Last Legion*, Aurelianus (here called "Aurelianus Ambrosius Ventidius") is a major character and is shown as one of the last loyal Romans, going to enormous lengths for his boy emperor Romulus Augustus, whose power has been wrested by the barbarian Odoacer. In this story, Romulus Augustus marries Igraine, and King Arthur is their son, and the sword of Julius Caesar becomes the legendary Excalibur in Britain. In the 2007 film version of the novel, he is played by Colin Firth and his name becomes "Aurelianus Caius Antonius". In both he is called "Aurelius" for short.
- The science fiction novel *Coalescent* (2004) by Stephen Baxter depicts Aurelianus as a general to Artorius, Briton and basis for the legend of King Arthur. In Baxter's novel, Aurelianus is a minor character who interacts with the book's main Roman-era protagonist, Regina, founder of a (literally) underground matriarchal society. In the text, he is credited with winning the Battle of Mount Badon.

- Several 2005-2006 episodes of the TV show *Stargate SG-1* are devoted to Arthuriana, during which the space-faring researchers learn that Ambrosius and Arthur are one and the same. He was said to be the son of Emperor Constantine, his Queen was Guinevere, and he was called the "Once and Future King." Merlin was an Ancient fleeing from Atlantis who later Ascends, then comes back in order to build the Sangraal, or Holy Grail, to defeat the Ori. Daniel Jackson also comments that it would mean that Ambrosius was 74 at the Battle of Mount Badon.

- The 2015 time travel romance novel *Refine* by Nichole Van shows Aurelius Ambrosius as the heroine's father who sends her to a future time with the help of a magical portal.

- *Ambrosius: Last of the Romans* (2017) is the second in Tim Walker's self-published series *A Light in the Dark Ages*. The stories are based on the accounts by Nennius and Monmouth.

- Ambrosius (voiced by Owen Teale) is a major character in the 2020 Audible Original drama *Albion: The Legend of Arthur*, in which he is depicted as the uncle of Arthur and having a son named Cunan.



The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon by Edward Burne - Jones